

TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE I

God in the Scriptures

Rolphy Pinto

THE SUPERNATURAL REALITY of God is an integral part of the lives and the human consciousness of believers in different faiths all over the world. But how can a contingent, finite human being have access to the supernatural infinite being? Moreover we, at least in the West, live in a secularised world where God can appear to be absent: ‘The believer lives amidst the provocation of secularization, in a world that seems to function perfectly *etsi deus non daretur* (“even though there were no God”).¹ In this context, how can we speak about a being who is beyond the scientific methods of verification? For Christians, incarnation is a mystery of God transcending God’s own transcendence and becoming immanent. While for some faiths such divine condescension would be a scandal, Christians marvel at it and wonder why God chose to reveal Godself in human form.

It would be a Herculean task to treat comprehensively of the transcendent–immanent nature of the God who is revealed in the Christian scriptures. But what we can say is that the scriptures speak of God in seemingly contradictory terms, as transcendent and immanent at once.

Some Key Texts

The *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* redirects the reader looking for an entry on ‘transcendence’ to ‘Old Testament view of God’ and on ‘immanence’ to ‘New Testament view of God’. It is true that texts affirming the transcendence of God abound in the Old Testament, and texts affirming God’s immanence abound in the New. But the God of the Old Testament is not exclusively transcendent, nor is the God of New Testament exclusively immanent. The people of Israel and the early Christians

¹ Félix-Alejandro Pastor, ‘God I: The God of Revelation’, in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, edited by René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (Middlegreen: St Pauls, 1994), 350.

experienced God as both transcendent and immanent. Thus the pages of the whole Bible affirm the transcendence and the immanence of God.

Transcendence Texts

Throughout the Old Testament there is a pervasive concept of the deity as a creator God who is self-existent—that is, existence is essential to God's inherent nature—and transcendent:

The word 'transcendent' comes from a Latin term meaning 'to climb over, to go beyond'. It describes a relationship between two entities, one of which 'transcends' or goes beyond the other. In theology it describes the most basic relationship between God and his creatures. God as Creator transcends all created beings in the sense that he is distinct from them in the very essence of his being. God is 'beyond' the universe and every created entity.²

God surpasses all human understanding

The transcendent God is encountered most particularly in the Pentateuch. A verse from the Song of Moses reads, 'Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders?' (Exodus 15: 11). The 'holiness' of God here does not have any particular moral connotations. It sets the divine apart from the human, the common and the ordinary. What the verse describes is the *otherness* of God. God is the creator, but God is distinct from creation and creation is not an extension of God.³ This God is unlike anything that humans can possibly know. The use of the language of holiness expresses God's transcendence.⁴ God surpasses all human understanding. The book of Deuteronomy clearly insists upon God's absolute uniqueness (4: 32–39; 6: 4; 10: 17; 32: 39; 33: 26), eternity (33: 27), holiness (32: 51), justice and righteousness (32: 4), all of which point to God's transcendence: 'For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome' (Deuteronomy 10: 17).⁵

While the Pentateuch differentiates God from the gods of the nations that neighboured Israel, the prophets of the Old Testament profess a strict monotheism, denying the existence of other gods. 'There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is no one besides me.

² Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All: Bible Doctrine for Today* (Joplin: College, 2002), 79.

³ See J. N. Oswalt, 'Theology of the Pentateuch', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, edited by David Weston Baker and T. Desmond Alexander (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 846–847, 849.

⁴ See Terence E. Fretheim, 'God, OT View of', in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), volume 2, 608.

⁵ See Daniel I. Block, 'Deuteronomy, Book of', in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* edited by Kevin Jonah Vanhoozer (London: SPCK, 2009), 171.

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.' (Isaiah 45:21b–22) The supreme God of whom Isaiah speaks is a 'Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple' (Isaiah 6:1). The prophetic literature pushes the transcendence of God further by speaking of an absolute deity. If the God of the Pentateuch transcends the existence of other possible deities, the God of the prophets rules out the very existence of such deities.

The transcendent God of the Old Testament is also a God of covenant, one who is often the interlocutor in a dialogical relationship with human beings. Yet even in this covenantal relationship, the human being is aware of the otherness and transcendence of God. Though we are told that God 'used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend' (Exodus 33:11), Deuteronomy reminds Israel that they 'saw no form' when God spoke to them at Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:12, 15). God would not reveal any name to Moses when he asked for it (Exodus 3:14–15), answering with the declaration of self-existence: 'I AM WHO I AM'. Moses expresses his desire to see the glory of God, but he is told, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live' (Exodus 33:18, 20). The people of Israel maintain a reverential fear towards their God, knowing well that they could not reduce God to a mere human being. This thought is clearly expressed in the words of the prophet Isaiah: 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.' (55:8–9)

Though they predominate in the Old Testament, the New Testament is not lacking in references to a transcendent God. These lines from Ephesians can be read as continuing where the declarations of Isaiah 45 left off:

God put [the immeasurable greatness of his] power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. (Ephesians 1:20–21)

The transcendence of God is here extended to Christ. By virtue of the resurrection and ascension, Christ shares in this transcendence. On the morning of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene wants to hold the resurrected, glorious body of Jesus. Jesus tells her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my



*The Adoration of the Trinity, by Vicente
López y Portaña, 1791–1792*

God and your God”.⁶ (John 20: 17) The christological hymn in Philippians confirms this transcendence of the risen Christ, saying, ‘Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name’ (2:9). The evangelist John makes Jesus speak of his own transcendence well before the resurrection: ‘You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world’ (John 8:23). John’s Gospel explicitly identifies the Son with the transcendent Godhead. Thus it is no surprise that these words of Jesus are in perfect consonance with those of Isaiah 55:8–9, ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts ...’. God in the form

of man, the person of Jesus and the perfect image of the Father (Colossians 1:15), is transcendent.

However, the transcendent One of the Pentateuch is also fully personal. This, as J. N. Oswalt explains, is what makes the biblical transcendence of God unlike the kind of transcendence found in Greek philosophy.

The Pentateuch’s idea of transcendence differs from that of the classical Greek philosophers. And this difference almost certainly explains why the Pentateuch continues to shape world thought while Aristotle’s [idea] had little impact even in its own day. The difference is the Bible’s successful coupling of transcendence and personality. The Greek philosophers could imagine something utterly other than the cosmos but could only conceive of it as impersonal.⁷

The Greek idea of transcendence is of an impersonal abstract principle; the Brahman, or absolute, of the Hindu Vedas, too, is an impersonal abstract

⁶ See Judith Gundry-Volf, ‘Pauline Epistles’, in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 575.

⁷ Oswalt, ‘Theology of the Pentateuch’, 847.

principle. But the God of Moses, by contrast, has attributes of personhood: 'a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin ...' (Exodus 34:6–7a).

The combination of transcendence and personality has consequences for the language that the Bible uses about God. God, as Oswalt continues 'is a person, and in human language it is impossible to speak of a person in gender-free terms'. He observes:

The Pentateuch, as well as the entire rest of the Bible, uses masculine pronouns and terms exclusively. Why is this? It is commonly suggested that this was a result of a patriarchal society However, reflection shows that this is much too easy an answer. In fact, every society in the ancient Near East was patriarchal The Israelites were no more prejudiced in favor of males than any of their peers.

However, Oswalt argues, where Israel's neighbours had female deities they were always characterized by sexuality, which,

... constantly underlines their oneness with the creation, perhaps because of the oneness of the mother and the child. If it is important to stress the separateness of God from creation, then it is impossible to describe him in anything other than male terms.⁸

Immanence Texts

If the transcendent creator is also a personal God who intervenes in human history then the God of the Bible is an *immanent* God as well as a transcendent one.

Immanence is that attribute of God that describes his presence and activity within the created world. Sometimes immanence is contrasted with transcendence, as if they were opposites. But this is a serious error that is based on the false idea that transcendence is a spatial concept, i.e., that God occupies some kind of space outside the borders of our universe and is thus spatially distant from us. But transcendence is not about distance; it is about difference. It does not mean that God is spatially separated from the world, but that his essence is qualitatively different from it. His transcendence in no way excludes his immanence or presence within the world. In fact, his infinite essence is what makes his omnipresence and his immanence possible.⁹

⁸ Oswalt, 'Theology of the Pentateuch', 848–849.

⁹ Cottrell, *Faith Once for All*, 88.

In the Bible the concept of immanence is closely linked to God's intimate presence with the people. In the *primaeva* story, the prehistoric chapters of the book of Genesis, we encounter an intimate God who used to walk in the garden 'at the time of evening breeze' (Genesis 3:8). God wrestles with Jacob (Genesis 32:22–32) and speaks face to face with Moses (Genesis 33:11). Accompanying the people of Israel in the desert as they journey out of Egyptian slavery, God goes before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21). God assures the chosen people, 'Have no dread ... for the Lord your God, who is present with you, is a great and awesome God' (Deuteronomy 7:21).

The prophets who formulated the sublime divine transcendence are even more vocal in affirming the immanence of God.¹⁰ For Jeremiah, God is both near and far. The prophet expresses the intimacy and omnipresence (paradoxically both closely linked with immanence) of God: 'Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord.' (Jeremiah 23: 24; and see Isaiah 40: 22) In chapter 43 of Isaiah, a hymn of love, God explicitly declares love for the people of Israel: 'I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you Do not fear, for I am with you' (43:2, 4, 5)

In the Psalms, the prayer book of Israel, the God addressed by the psalmists is both transcendent and immanent. 'The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?' (Psalm 113:4–6).¹¹ But God is invoked in times of trouble and praised for infinite benevolence. Psalm 23 speaks of the Divine Shepherd who provides for, leads, protects and anoints the people, and who celebrates with them. Psalm 139 is an extraordinary example of the intimacy of God. The psalmist here expresses his astonishment at the overwhelming presence of God that penetrates both his innermost depths and outermost universe. He acknowledges being known by God inside and out. It is hard to find another text in the Bible that would express the immanence of God in clearer terms:

¹⁰ The 'Holy' God of Hosea, Isaiah, Habakkuk, Ezekiel and Jeremiah (Hosea 11:9, Isaiah 6; 40:25 and 41: 14, Habakkuk 1: 12 and 3: 3, Ezekiel 1, Jeremiah 50: 29 and 51: 5 respectively) is not distant and indifferent to the human condition of the chosen people. God is the Lord and husband of Israel, ever willing to forgive her infidelity and to accept her (Hosea 2). YHWH is father (Hosea 11: 1–4; 8–9) and mother (Isaiah 49: 15–16) of Israel. See Paolo Merlo, *L'Antico testamento: introduzione storico-letteraria* (Rome: Carocci, 2008), 208.

¹¹ See also Psalms 71:19, 92:8, 97:9.



God the Father, by *Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano*, c. 1510–1517

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern
my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down, and are
acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it
completely.
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand
upon me. (Psalm 139: 1–5)¹²

Many of the attributes of the immanent God in both Testaments are stereotypically feminine—closeness, tenderness, affection, mercy and intimacy—despite the fact that God is always grammatically masculine. The absence of feminine pronouns referring to God thus does not imply that the people of Israel and the New Testament Christians did not experience the motherly tenderness and intimacy of God. This can be inferred from the maternal metaphors used to refer to God. Deuteronomy 32: 11–12 compares God to a mother eagle: ‘As an eagle stirs up its nest,

¹² For an interesting treatment of how biblical exegesis can help with prayer, taking Psalm 139 as an example, see Juan Manuel Martín-Moreno, ‘La nueva hermenéutica y el uso de la Biblia en Ejercicios’, *Manresa*, 82 (2010), 325–339.

and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him ...'.¹³ A more direct image asks, 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands ...' (Isaiah 49: 15–16a) Luke reports these words of Jesus in his Gospel: 'How often have I desired to gather your [Jerusalem's] children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' (Luke 13: 34b)

The reader of the New Testament encounters many references to an immanent God. The incarnation is undoubtedly the event that speaks most loudly and clearly of the immanence of God—Emmanuel, 'God is with us' (Matthew 1: 23).¹⁴ John announces: 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth' (John 1: 14). In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus declares, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among [within] you' (Luke 17: 20b–21).

The disciples of Jesus testify to an intimate divine experience:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us (1 John 1: 1–2).

The eternal Word goes beyond—transcends—transcendence itself and becomes immanent:

Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Philippians 2: 6–8)

The immanence of God is a consequence of God's self-communication and self-emptying.

¹³ Compare Exodus 19:4; and see *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*, edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Scripture, 1983), 1985.

¹⁴ See James D. G. Dunn, 'Incarnation', in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, volume 3, 37.

Transcendence and Immanence Together

The christological hymn of Philippians 2 is quoted above speaking both of God's transcendence (vv. 9–11) and immanence (vv. 6–8). The hymn describes the descent and the ascent of the Eternal Word. This is an example where both immanence and transcendence appear in the same pericope. There are more texts of this nature. In the Old Testament, Isaiah 57: 15 indicates the paradox of transcendence:

For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

Qadhosh, the 'Holy One' expresses the otherness of God, yet this Holy One dwells in the midst of Israel (compare Isaiah 12:6), especially in the humble and contrite of heart. Holiness does not necessarily mean aloofness or distance. God is both far off and near at hand.¹⁵

A second text of this kind is found in St Paul's Areopagus discourse (Acts 17: 24–31). The God to whom Paul refers in vv. 24–26 is transcendent: 'The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth'. This God is self-sufficient, master of space and time, and cannot be confined by human schemes. But in v. 27 Paul makes a transition: human beings, he says, 'would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us'. Then comes the bible verse which perhaps best expresses the intimacy of God's immanence: 'For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring"' (v. 28). This God who grounds our being is none other than the risen Christ.

Finding the Presence

Biblical texts such as these might give the impression that God's immanence comes at the cost of God's transcendence and vice versa, but, as Stratford Caldecott writes: 'God is not merely immanent (like a soul within a body) nor merely transcendent (like a Deist watchmaker). He is both, and he is immanent precisely because he is transcendent and, therefore, impossible to circumscribe or limit.' In a certain sense, the reverse is also true. God can be transcendent precisely by being immanent, omnipresent and

¹⁵ See Fretheim, 'God, OT View of', 608. See also Ephesians 4: 6: 'one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all'.

all-pervading. It should be remembered, moreover, that transcendence *without* immanence would produce deism (as Caldecott affirms), and immanence without transcendence would lead to pantheism. Each requires the other to form a balanced theology.¹⁶

The so-called ‘fundamental axiom’ of Trinitarian theology proposed by Karl Rahner is helpful here. He writes: “The “economic Trinity” is the “immanent Trinity” and the “immanent Trinity” is the “economic Trinity””.¹⁷ Alister McGrath offers an explanation of his words:

The basic distinction here is between the manner in which God is known through revelation in history (‘the economic Trinity’), and the manner in which God exists internally (‘the immanent Trinity’). The ‘economic Trinity’ can be thought of as the way in which we experience God’s self-disclosure in history, and the ‘immanent Trinity’ as God’s diversity and unity as [they are] within the Godhead itself.

So, in Rahner’s axiom, McGrath concludes, ‘the way God is revealed and experienced in history corresponds to the way in which God actually is’.¹⁸ Thus before even becoming a concept or doctrine, the axiom is an experiential reality. It is the lived experience of the biblical community. They spoke of a transcendent and an immanent God because they experienced God as such. We know that the transcendent God is also immanent because that is how God revealed Godself to us.¹⁹ The scriptures consistently maintain a tension between these two seemingly opposite views of God and do not resolve it.

Another, quite different source of tension within the scriptures is explored by Roland Meynet in his introduction to the synoptic Gospels.²⁰ Meynet speaks of the tensions that arise in the process of interpreting two or more biblical versions of similar material. The Bible retains, for example, two narratives of the creation (Genesis 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–25) and two of the giving of the Decalogue (Deuteronomy 5:6–21 and Exodus 20:2–17). The synoptic Gospels provide many more such cases—notably, for Meynet, the two versions of the Lord’s Prayer. Would it not have been simpler to opt for one version over the other?

¹⁶ Stratford Caldecott, “‘Lost in the Forest?’ Some Books on Ecology”, *Priests and People*, 9 (1995).

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, translated by Joseph Donceel (London: Burns and Oates, 2001 [1970]), 22.

¹⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 243.

¹⁹ See Luis F. Ladaria, *The Living and True God: The Mystery of the Trinity*, translated by María Isabel Reyna (Miami: Convivium, 2010), 49 and n.2.

²⁰ Roland Meynet, *A New Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Miami: Convivium, 2010), 220–223.

He explains the wisdom behind retaining both versions by using the image of the two cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant. Meynet gives an exegetical analysis of Exodus 22: 10–40, the description of the construction of the Ark. The two cherubim face each other on the Ark, and the space between them is empty. In the Ark are the tablets of the Law—the Decalogue, the words inscribed by the Lord on the stones. Where, then, does one find the presence of the Lord?

His word will not be shut up in the objects described, not even in the ark of the covenant or the Decalogue; his word will come out from the space between the two cherubim placed facing one another on the mercy seat: «from between the two cherubim», says the text, at the very heart of the central passage, the place of the *Shekina*, the Presence.²¹

A version of this argument could be used to explain the reason for the unresolved tension between opposing views of God in the Bible. Writing about the nature of biblical wisdom, Daniel Treier sheds light on the need to maintain the dynamic tension between the transcendence and the immanence of God:

The way of wisdom might foster a Christian theism that maintains transcendence via doctrines of creation and prevenient divine action without ignoring the immanent. The postmodern hope is that, in this manner, tensions connected to biblical wisdom—transcendence and immanence, divine and human action, creation and redemption, command and common sense—might be embraced in their movement rather than denied by prioritizing one side or the other in some linear procedure. Usually, such procedures have made God remote to, or expelled from, what is rational.²²

It is important to maintain the tension between the two poles of transcendence and immanence because that tension is creative and, in the midst of it, one finds the Presence.

Rolphy Pinto SJ is a Jesuit priest of the Gujarat Province of the Society of Jesus. He holds a doctorate in spiritual theology, which he has been teaching at the Pontifical Gregorian University since 2014.

²¹ Meynet, *New Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, 222.

²² Daniel J. Treier, 'Wisdom', in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 846.